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The Discursive Construction of Women's Identity in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Official and Unofficial Discourses through the Lens of Laclau and Mouffe

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discursive construction of women's identity in post-revolutionary Iran by comparing official and unofficial discourses through the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive-critical, and poststructuralist approach, the study analyzes how competing systems of meaning construct different female subject positions and struggle to stabilize the meanings of key concepts related to gender, rights, family, morality, and social participation. The empirical corpus consisted primarily of 22 semi-structured interviews with Iranian women occupying diverse institutional, professional, cultural, and civil positions, supplemented by selected official documents and relevant cultural texts. The analysis focused on nodal points, articulation, chains of equivalence, floating signifiers, antagonistic boundaries, othering, and hegemonic struggle. The findings revealed two broad discursive formations. The official governmental-religious discourse was organized around the nodal point of the "elevated family," within which women's identities were articulated through motherhood, wifehood, chastity, religious commitment, and socially legitimate participation compatible with family responsibilities. In contrast, the unofficial modern-critical discourse was organized around the nodal point of the "right to choose and individual agency," emphasizing autonomy, economic independence, bodily self-determination, equal legal recognition, and freedom from coercive gender norms. The strongest areas of discursive antagonism concerned floating signifiers such as freedom, women's dignity, gender justice, hijab, family, and economic independence. Although official discourse retained substantial institutional power, the findings indicated increasing instability in its capacity to monopolize meaning at the level of lived experience. The emergence of dual and hybrid identities further demonstrated that women do not necessarily identify completely with either discourse. The study concludes that women's identity in contemporary Iran is an open and contested field shaped by continuous hegemonic struggles over the meaning of legitimate womanhood.

Keywords: *Women's Identity; Discourse Analysis; Official Discourse; Unofficial Discourse; Laclau and Mouffe; Hegemony; Post-Revolutionary Iran*

Introduction

The question of women's identity in post-revolutionary Iran cannot be adequately understood as a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, or state restriction and women's resistance. Rather, women's identity has been continuously constructed, contested, and reconstructed within a heterogeneous

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field of social meanings in which political institutions, religious authorities, legal structures, family norms, civil society actors, women's movements, everyday practices, and emerging communicative spaces compete to define what it means to be a woman, what constitutes a legitimate female subject, and which forms of female agency are socially recognizable. The 1979 Islamic Revolution represented a major historical rupture in this field because it transformed not only political institutions but also the symbolic vocabulary through which women's social roles, bodies, responsibilities, rights, and identities were interpreted. Earlier transformations in Iranian women's rights had already demonstrated the close relationship between political change and the construction of gender norms (1). Yet the post-revolutionary period established a particularly powerful institutional articulation between religion, family, law, morality, and women's social identity. At the same time, women did not merely receive these meanings passively. They participated in education, employment, civil society, cultural production, political activity, and everyday forms of negotiation that gradually produced alternative accounts of womanhood. The resulting field is therefore best conceptualized not as the coexistence of an official image and an empirical reality but as an ongoing struggle among competing discourses seeking to stabilize the meaning of womanhood.

Research on women in contemporary Iran has repeatedly shown that social and legal transformations have produced contradictory outcomes. Women have experienced significant expansion in education, professional specialization, public visibility, and cultural activity while simultaneously confronting persistent legal, institutional, and normative inequalities. The changing history of women's employment, for example, reveals that women's economic participation has been interpreted through different ideological frames across political periods rather than simply increasing along a linear path (2). Similarly, analyses of women's rights claims in electoral politics demonstrate that women's demands have entered formal political discourse even where significant discrepancies remain between rights claims and dominant legal interpretations (3). Women's participation in political life likewise involves multiple strategies for negotiating institutional constraints and constructing spaces for political action (4). Such developments indicate that changes in women's social position are inseparable from changes in the language through which rights, participation, morality, family, equality, and citizenship are defined. Post-revolutionary gender politics is therefore not only a conflict over material opportunities; it is also a conflict over the production of legitimate meanings.

The official discourse that emerged and became institutionally consolidated after the Islamic Revolution has generally interpreted women's identity through a religious and family-centered framework. Within this articulation, motherhood, wifehood, chastity, family stability, moral responsibility, and participation in the reproduction of Islamic society become central components of legitimate womanhood. Such a discourse does not necessarily exclude women from education, professional activity, political participation, or public life. Instead, it attempts to give these activities meaning by incorporating them into a broader normative order in which family and religious responsibility remain privileged. This distinction is important because the official discourse should not be reduced to a simplistic claim that women belong exclusively to the domestic sphere. Studies of post-revolutionary development policies show that official representations of women have varied across political administrations and have sometimes emphasized public participation, economic development, or social activity while retaining broader gendered assumptions about responsibility and family (5). Analyses of development discourse similarly demonstrate that women's roles have been reconstructed in relation to changing state priorities without eliminating the ideological importance of gender differentiation (6). Thus, the continuity of official discourse lies less in the complete exclusion

of women from public life than in the effort to define the terms under which female participation becomes meaningful and legitimate.

Alongside this institutional discourse, a diverse unofficial field has developed through women's everyday experiences, civil activism, legal criticism, intellectual production, independent cultural spaces, social movements, and later digital communication. This unofficial discourse is not a single organization or unified ideological movement. Its internal diversity is substantial, and its participants may differ in their attitudes toward religion, feminism, nationalism, family, sexuality, political reform, and the degree of structural transformation they consider desirable. Nevertheless, a recurring orientation within this field is the attempt to displace imposed definitions of women's identity and to foreground agency, personal choice, equal citizenship, bodily autonomy, and the capacity of women to define their own life trajectories. Islamic feminist demands themselves have demonstrated that critique of gender inequality can emerge from within religious frameworks rather than only from secular opposition (7). This complicates any straightforward division between an Islamic state and a secular feminist opposition. Earlier scholarship on women and politics in Iran also showed the emergence of feminist voices from within changing religious and political contexts (8). The unofficial field should therefore be understood as a discursive space in which alternative meanings become available and in which existing meanings can be detached from official articulations and connected to new chains of interpretation.

This process is particularly visible in apparently shared concepts. Terms such as freedom, dignity, justice, family, security, employment, independence, and even religion appear across different ideological positions, yet their meanings are far from stable. "Freedom," for example, may be articulated as spiritual liberation from desire, moral discipline, and resistance to cultural domination, or it may be articulated as freedom from coercion, legal restriction, censorship, and externally imposed definitions of lifestyle. "Dignity" may be defined in relation to chastity and protection from sexual commodification, or in relation to equal legal recognition and individual agency. "Justice" may refer to differentiated rights and responsibilities presumed appropriate to natural or religiously recognized differences between women and men, or it may mean formal and substantive legal equality. These disagreements demonstrate why discourse theory is particularly appropriate for examining women's identity in Iran. Meaning is not simply attached to words once and for all. It becomes temporarily stabilized within particular relations among signifiers, institutions, practices, and identities. Laclau and Mouffe's approach conceptualizes precisely this process by treating social meaning as contingent and political rather than naturally fixed (9).

The importance of discourse for identity also lies in its productive rather than merely representational character. Discourse does not simply describe a pre-existing woman; it provides subject positions through which individuals can recognize themselves and others. In the official discourse, the legitimate woman can be constructed as a Muslim, morally committed, family-centered subject whose participation in public life remains connected to responsibilities toward family, religion, and society. In alternative discourse, the legitimate woman can be constructed as an autonomous and reflexive subject whose identity is not exhausted by motherhood, marriage, or institutional expectations and whose dignity depends on her capacity to choose. These subject positions do not mechanically determine how women actually live. Individuals can accept, reinterpret, negotiate, combine, or resist them. The significance of everyday practice in transforming political meanings has been emphasized in studies of ordinary politics in the Middle East, where social change often emerges through dispersed daily activities rather than only through formal collective movements (10). De Certeau's analysis of everyday practices likewise helps explain how individuals may tactically appropriate structures they do not formally control (11). These perspectives

are especially relevant where women outwardly conform to institutional requirements while privately maintaining different values and identities.

Religion adds another layer of complexity to this field. Islamic commitments cannot simply be treated as the opposite of agency, because religious subjectivity may itself be actively cultivated and experienced as meaningful. Mahmood's analysis of female piety challenged assumptions that agency necessarily takes the form of resistance to religious norms (12). Studies of women, leadership, culture, and Islam have similarly shown the complexity with which women negotiate religious values, organizational roles, and gender expectations (13). Consequently, the distinction between official and unofficial discourse in the present study is not intended to classify all religious women as official subjects or all critical women as secular subjects. It refers instead to competing logics of articulation. Religious language may itself become a site of contestation when one discourse associates religion with differentiated gender roles while another associates it with human dignity, reinterpretation, or equality. The existence of such internal variation is crucial for avoiding an essentialist account of Iranian women.

Despite the considerable literature on women's rights, political participation, Islamic feminism, employment, and gender policy in post-revolutionary Iran, less attention has been given to the simultaneous reconstruction of official and unofficial discourses as competing hegemonic projects. Historical accounts have demonstrated that women have long been central to Iran's political transformations (14), and comparative analyses of Middle Eastern gender change have documented the relationship among modernization, state institutions, class, and women's social position (15). Critical feminist scholarship has also examined tensions between feminism, religious politics, and postmodern interpretations of cultural difference (16). Yet examining particular policies or movements does not by itself reveal how rival discourses organize multiple issues into broader systems of meaning and thereby construct different forms of female subjectivity. A discourse-analytical perspective makes it possible to ask not only what each discourse says about employment, hijab, family, or equality, but how these elements become connected, which nodal points organize them, which identities they authorize, and which alternative identities they exclude.

The present study therefore aims to analyze how official and unofficial discourses construct women's identity in Iran after the Islamic Revolution and how these competing discourses struggle to stabilize the meanings of central gender-related concepts. It examines the nodal points around which each discourse is organized, the subsidiary signifiers that acquire meaning through these nodal points, the antagonistic boundaries through which each discourse constructs its constitutive outside, and the floating signifiers over which hegemonic struggle becomes most visible. Rather than assuming that either discourse completely determines women's lived identities, the study also considers the emergence of hybrid, negotiated, and dual forms of subjectivity that reveal the instability of hegemonic projects. Through this approach, women's identity becomes intelligible as neither a fixed religious essence nor a stable modern individualism, but as an open and contested political construction whose temporary forms are continually challenged by alternative articulations.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

The theoretical foundation of this study is the poststructuralist discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Its central premise is that social reality is not composed of identities and meanings whose essence exists prior to politics; rather, social meanings are constructed through relational systems that can never achieve complete closure. Laclau's early elaboration of dislocation emphasized that social structures cannot permanently stabilize themselves because events and demands continually expose the incompleteness of existing

arrangements (17). In subsequent work, the openness and contingency of meaning became central to understanding political identification and emancipatory projects (18). Laclau and Mouffe subsequently developed a more systematic account of articulation, hegemony, equivalence, antagonism, and discursive struggle (9). In this framework, discourse is not simply speech or text. It encompasses the wider practices through which objects, identities, relationships, and social possibilities become meaningful. This approach is particularly suitable for studying women's identity because categories such as "woman," "mother," "citizen," "Muslim woman," "independent woman," and "successful woman" are treated as historically constructed subject positions rather than natural and universal identities.

The concept of articulation is essential to this theoretical framework. Articulation refers to the practice of establishing relations among elements so that their identities are modified through those relations. A signifier therefore acquires meaning not because it possesses an inherent content but because of its position within a structured field of difference. Introductory accounts of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory emphasize this relational understanding of meaning and the impossibility of final discursive closure (19). Jørgensen and Phillips likewise explain discourse analysis as an examination of how particular representations become stabilized while alternatives are marginalized (20). This principle makes it possible to understand why the same term can acquire different meanings in rival discourses. Employment, for example, may be articulated with family support, social responsibility, and national development in one discourse, while in another it may be connected to independence, autonomy, and the ability to leave unequal relationships. The word remains the same, but its social meaning changes because its position in the chain of articulation changes.

Within a discourse, certain privileged signifiers function as nodal points around which other meanings are organized. A nodal point does not permanently eliminate ambiguity; instead, it temporarily structures the field by providing a center around which otherwise dispersed elements can be arranged. Torfing's systematic discussion of poststructuralist discourse theory emphasizes that nodal points are essential to the partial fixation of meaning within hegemonic formations (21). For the analysis of women's identity, identifying the nodal point is especially useful because it reveals the principle through which multiple gender-related issues become intelligible as components of a broader project. If "family" becomes the nodal point, employment, education, clothing, sexuality, political participation, and even freedom may be interpreted in terms of their contribution to or compatibility with family stability. If "right to choose" becomes the nodal point, the same issues can be reorganized around individual agency. The difference between discourses therefore does not consist merely of separate attitudes toward isolated issues; it concerns the relational logic through which the entire field is organized.

The concept of chains of equivalence further explains how different demands can become politically unified. In hegemonic politics, demands that are not identical can be represented as equivalent because they are opposed to a shared obstacle or associated with a broader transformative principle. Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize equivalence as a political logic through which differences are partially suspended in the formation of broader collective identities (9). In the field of women's rights, demands concerning divorce law, custody, employment, access to public spaces, clothing, political participation, bodily autonomy, or equal legal treatment can be articulated as equivalent expressions of a broader struggle against discrimination. Conversely, demands concerning chastity, motherhood, family protection, moral order, and resistance to Western cultural influence can be connected within a different equivalential chain. This process helps explain how heterogeneous claims become components of a recognizable discourse even when individual participants do not endorse every position equally.

Antagonism is equally central because social identities require boundaries. A discourse achieves temporary coherence not only by connecting elements internally but also by identifying what threatens or negates its identity. Mouffe emphasizes the constitutive role of political conflict and rejects the possibility of a fully reconciled social order in which antagonism disappears (22). From this perspective, the "Other" is not merely an external opponent added to an already complete identity; the boundary with the Other contributes to the formation of identity itself. The official construction of the morally committed Muslim woman, for instance, gains coherence partly through differentiation from figures such as the "Westernized woman," "Western feminism," cultural permissiveness, or secular individualism. The unofficial construction of the autonomous woman similarly gains coherence through differentiation from patriarchal law, compulsory gender roles, restrictive interpretations of religion, and institutional control over women's bodies. These antagonistic frontiers simplify internally diverse fields by transforming them into more coherent political identities.

The concept of hegemony connects articulation to power. Gramsci's analysis of hegemony demonstrated that durable political domination cannot be understood only through coercion; it also depends on the capacity of dominant groups to establish moral, cultural, and intellectual leadership (23). Laclau and Mouffe reformulated this insight within a poststructuralist theory in which hegemony refers to contingent efforts to organize the social field around a particular articulation (9). Hegemony is therefore always incomplete. Institutional authority may support a discourse by embedding it in laws, schools, bureaucracies, media, and official symbolic systems, yet institutional power does not guarantee complete identification by social subjects. A hegemonic discourse becomes unstable when its categories no longer adequately incorporate emerging experiences and demands. In the present study, this distinction between institutional dominance and cultural identification is crucial. Official discourse possesses extensive resources of institutional reproduction, but alternative understandings of womanhood can remain active in everyday life even where they lack equivalent formal power.

Floating signifiers reveal this instability particularly clearly. These are socially significant terms whose meanings remain disputed because rival projects attempt to incorporate them into different articulations (18). Freedom, dignity, justice, security, equality, family, independence, and progress can function in this way. The existence of a shared vocabulary should therefore not be mistaken for substantive consensus. Two discourses may both endorse "dignity" while constructing entirely different conditions for its realization. One may connect dignity to modesty, protection, and moral recognition, while another connects it to bodily autonomy, equal legal personhood, and freedom from discrimination. Similarly, two discourses may value women's economic independence but for contrasting reasons. One may regard employment as supporting family resilience, whereas another may understand income as a condition of bargaining power and personal autonomy. The analytical task is not only to record whether a term is positively or negatively evaluated but to trace the chain of meanings through which it is positioned.

Although Laclau and Mouffe provide the primary theoretical framework, critical discourse analysis offers useful supplementary tools for identifying the textual mechanisms through which meanings are reproduced. Fairclough's work emphasizes the relationship among textual practices, broader discourse practices, and social structures (24). His later formulation of critical discourse analysis further highlights the ideological effects of linguistic choices and the capacity of discourse to naturalize unequal relations (25). Chouliaraki and Fairclough extend this analysis to the changing conditions of late modernity, in which multiple discourses interact and hybridize across institutional domains (26). In the present study, such insights assist with the identification of recurring categories, oppositions, presuppositions, and intertextual relationships in interviews and documents. They do not replace Laclau and

Mouffe's framework; rather, they facilitate the movement from detailed textual evidence to the reconstruction of broader hegemonic formations.

The empirical literature on Iranian women provides strong evidence that gender meanings have historically been politically variable. Paidar demonstrates that women were not marginal to Iran's twentieth-century political transformations but were repeatedly positioned within changing nationalist, modernizing, religious, and revolutionary projects (14). Eskandari and colleagues likewise trace competing discourses of women's rights from the Constitutional period to the Islamic Revolution, showing that claims about women's social position developed in relation to wider transformations in political legitimacy (1). These studies underline an important point: neither "traditional womanhood" nor "modern womanhood" has existed outside political processes. Both have been articulated within historically specific projects.

Post-revolutionary research further demonstrates the heterogeneity of official gender discourse. Sadeghi Fasaei and colleagues identify shifts in the representation of women across different executive periods of the Islamic Republic (5). Mirabi and colleagues show how development policies articulate women's roles in changing ways while continuing to reflect broader ideological assumptions concerning gender and development (6). The historical trajectory of women's employment also shows that female economic participation has moved through varying discursive constructions before and after the Revolution (2). Consequently, the term "official discourse" in the present study should not imply that every governmental period or institutional actor produces identical language. It refers to a broader hegemonic logic whose internal variations remain structured by recurring relationships among religion, family, moral order, differentiated gender responsibilities, and institutionally authorized forms of female participation.

The literature also documents the development of alternative and reformist discourses. Mir-Hosseini's analysis of divorce, veiling, and emerging feminist voices illustrates the ways women's claims could develop through changing interpretations of Islamic and legal discourse (8). Nosrat Kharazmi and colleagues demonstrate that women's cultural action after the Revolution has included Islamic feminist demands that challenge aspects of the existing order while remaining engaged with religious vocabulary (7). Bagheri and colleagues show that women's rights demands in electoral discourse generate comparisons with constitutional commitments and reveal persistent areas of tension (3). Moradinejad and colleagues further emphasize the strategies through which Iranian women enter political arenas and confront structures that define political participation (4). These studies suggest that the unofficial discourse cannot be understood as a foreign or externally imported phenomenon. It develops partly from contradictions internal to Iranian institutions and partly from women's engagement with education, professional life, law, religion, politics, and changing social expectations.

Broader regional scholarship likewise cautions against treating Muslim women as passive bearers of fixed cultural norms. Mahmood's analysis of pious women demonstrates that agency can take forms that do not correspond to liberal expectations of resistance (12). Koburtay and colleagues show that women navigating leadership, Islam, and cultural expectations may simultaneously reproduce, negotiate, and reinterpret gender norms (13). Conversely, Moghissi warns against theoretical approaches that romanticize religious or cultural difference at the cost of addressing power and gender inequality (16). These tensions are productive for the present analysis because they prevent either discourse from being treated as sociologically transparent. The official discourse cannot simply be equated with false consciousness, and the unofficial discourse cannot simply be equated with an

unmediated universal truth. Both are discursive projects that construct subjects, prioritize particular values, and produce exclusions.

The theoretical synthesis adopted here therefore treats women's identity as a contested field of articulation. Institutionalized official discourse attempts to produce a recognizable female subject through the partial fixation of family, religion, morality, participation, and gender difference. Unofficial discourse attempts to dislocate these linkages and reconstruct womanhood around choice, equal personhood, individual agency, economic independence, and control over life decisions. Between these poles, however, individuals may occupy contradictory positions, combine religious commitments with demands for autonomy, outwardly comply with institutional expectations while privately rejecting them, or move between discursive repertoires according to context. The central theoretical expectation of this study is consequently not that two perfectly homogeneous groups will be discovered, but that two competing hegemonic logics will become visible through recurring articulations and that their incomplete character will be revealed through boundary cases, internal criticisms, semantic overlaps, and hybrid forms of subjectivity.

Method

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive-critical research design grounded in a poststructuralist understanding of discourse. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate because the purpose of the research was not to estimate the prevalence of predetermined attitudes among Iranian women but to reconstruct the systems of meaning through which women's identities, rights, responsibilities, choices, and social roles are made intelligible. Qualitative research is particularly suited to questions concerning interpretation, experience, context, and meaning formation (27). Merriam and Tisdell similarly emphasize that qualitative inquiry seeks to understand how individuals construct and interpret social realities within specific contexts (28). The study therefore did not treat interview responses as isolated opinions to be counted or ranked. Instead, responses were analyzed relationally in order to identify recurrent articulations, privileged signifiers, boundaries of belonging, and competing definitions of key concepts.

The epistemological orientation of the research was critical and poststructuralist. From this perspective, neither interview accounts nor official documents were approached as transparent representations of an objective social reality. Both were treated as sites in which meanings are produced, reproduced, contested, and potentially transformed. The analytical framework was based primarily on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, especially the concepts of nodal point, articulation, chain of equivalence, floating signifier, antagonistic frontier, subject position, dislocation, and hegemony (9). Howarth's methodological interpretation of poststructuralist discourse analysis was relevant to the movement between empirical materials and the reconstruction of broader discursive structures (19). The analysis was also informed by critical discourse-analytical attention to intertextuality, lexical choices, oppositions, and the ideological organization of statements (24). These textual tools were used to identify discursive elements before those elements were interpreted through Laclau and Mouffe's broader theory of hegemonic articulation.

The empirical corpus consisted principally of twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews with Iranian women occupying diverse social, occupational, cultural, and institutional positions. Participants were selected purposively because the research required respondents capable of articulating contrasting positions concerning women's identity, rights, family roles, social participation, religion, public culture, and institutional structures. Purposeful

sampling is appropriate where participants are selected for their information richness and relevance to the analytical problem rather than statistical representativeness (29). The final sample reflected two broad discursive locations identified through participants' social positions and the meanings expressed during the interviews. Nine participants were associated predominantly with the official discourse and were connected to governmental, religious-governmental, policy, academic, or institutionally sanctioned environments. Thirteen participants were associated predominantly with the unofficial discourse and included women whose occupational and cultural locations were more closely related to civil activity, independent professional life, journalism, entrepreneurship, critical legal or academic perspectives, and digital or non-state social spaces.

This distinction between official and unofficial participants was analytical rather than ontological. Participants were not assumed to embody coherent ideologies simply because of their occupations. Some respondents located within formal institutions expressed positions that departed from dominant official formulations, while some participants outside formal institutions retained religious commitments or valued family structures. Such boundary positions were analytically important because they demonstrated that discourse does not perfectly coincide with organizational membership. A subject may be positioned within one institutional structure while drawing on signifiers associated with another discourse. This understanding is consistent with poststructuralist theory, which rejects the assumption that social identities are fixed by structural location alone (17). Consequently, the two groups were used to reconstruct dominant discursive tendencies rather than to classify all Iranian women into mutually exclusive social categories.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to combine comparability across participants with sufficient flexibility to explore unexpected meanings and experiences. Semi-structured interviewing is particularly appropriate for research in which the investigator begins with a conceptual framework but remains open to participants' own categories and elaborations (30). Interview topics addressed participants' understandings of Iranian womanhood, the sources of women's identity, family and religion, successful womanhood, individual and collective aspirations, freedom, dignity, justice, feminism, women's employment and economic independence, social and legal obstacles, representations of women in official media, digital spaces, clothing and hijab, perceived differences between private and public selves, strategies for pursuing women's demands, and expectations concerning future gender discourse. These topics allowed the analysis to move from broad self-definitions to contested signifiers and finally to perceived strategies of change.

The documentary corpus was used to contextualize and triangulate the interview material rather than to construct a separate legal history. Official materials included selected constitutional provisions relevant to family and women, the General Policies on Family, and selected political-religious statements concerning women, family, and gendered responsibilities. These materials were analyzed because institutional discourse achieves hegemonic force partly through its incorporation into laws, policy frameworks, educational principles, and authoritative public statements. Fairclough's concept of intertextuality was useful for examining how interview participants reproduced, reformulated, or resisted categories that also appeared in official texts (24). Cultural and literary material was used more selectively to illuminate alternative constructions of female agency and lived experience. The purpose was not to conduct a comprehensive literary analysis but to recognize cultural production as a field in which alternative female subject positions can be articulated.

Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively rather than as completely separate phases. The logic of theoretical and thematic saturation informed decisions concerning the adequacy of the interview corpus. Guest,

Namey, and Chen emphasize that saturation should be assessed in relation to the emergence of new thematic information rather than treated as a purely numerical threshold (31). In the present study, the final corpus was considered analytically sufficient when additional interviews no longer substantially altered the principal discursive structures identified around family, right to choose, freedom, dignity, justice, clothing, economic independence, and institutional power. This did not imply that all possible Iranian women's perspectives had been exhausted. Rather, saturation concerned the central analytical patterns necessary for reconstructing the two competing discursive formations.

The first stage of analysis involved close reading and deconstruction of the interviews and relevant documents. Recurrent terms, evaluative categories, oppositions, assumptions, identity labels, causal explanations, and references to desirable or undesirable forms of womanhood were identified. Particular attention was paid to statements in which participants defined a concept explicitly, such as "freedom means," "a successful woman is," "dignity is," or "the greatest obstacle is," because such formulations often revealed attempts to stabilize contested meanings. Critical discourse analysis informed attention to naturalized assumptions and ideological oppositions (25). However, the analysis did not remain at the level of linguistic description. Each element was examined in relation to the wider chain through which it acquired meaning.

The second stage reconstructed the official discourse. The analysis asked which signifier functioned as the principal organizing point, which subsidiary signifiers were articulated around it, how particular meanings were normalized, and what identities were excluded. The nodal point that emerged most consistently was the "elevated family," understood as an idealized family institution grounded in religious morality and social responsibility. Around this center, motherhood, wifehood, chastity, women's education, employment, public participation, freedom, and gender justice were articulated in ways that preserved the normative priority of family and Islamic values. Women's education and employment were accepted and frequently valued, but their legitimacy was often connected to their compatibility with motherhood, family cohesion, socially beneficial service, or religiously appropriate participation. The official subject position was therefore reconstructed as the morally committed, family-centered, socially active Muslim woman rather than as a simply secluded domestic woman.

The third stage reconstructed the unofficial discourse through the same analytical procedure. Its central nodal point was identified as "the right to choose and individual agency." The meaning of womanhood was organized around women's capacity to define their own life trajectories, exercise control over major personal decisions, achieve financial independence, participate as equal citizens, and challenge legal or cultural arrangements experienced as discriminatory. Diverse claims concerning employment, divorce, clothing, bodily autonomy, political participation, family relations, and access to social spaces could thereby be articulated within a chain of equivalence centered on the removal of discrimination and the expansion of meaningful choice. The unofficial discourse was internally more heterogeneous than the official discourse, but the recurrent centrality of agency allowed these heterogeneous demands to form a recognizable counter-hegemonic pattern.

The fourth analytical stage compared the two formations as competing hegemonic projects. Particular attention was paid to floating signifiers used by both discourses but attached to different meanings. Freedom, dignity, justice, family, employment, independence, and clothing emerged as major sites of semantic struggle. Rather than assuming that use of the same term demonstrated consensus, the analysis examined the chains of articulation surrounding each concept. This procedure followed the broader discourse-theoretical principle that political struggle concerns the partial fixation of meaning (20). Antagonistic frontiers were also identified by examining the groups,

institutions, practices, and ideologies described as threatening legitimate womanhood. The official discourse recurrently constructed Western feminism, cultural invasion, secularism, and sexual commodification as threatening Others, while the unofficial discourse constructed patriarchal legal structures, coercive gender regulation, discriminatory law, and restrictive institutional interpretations of religion as principal obstacles.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through triangulation, rich contextual interpretation, reflexivity, and the preservation of a traceable relationship between empirical evidence and theoretical inference. Denzin's conception of triangulation emphasizes the value of approaching a social phenomenon through multiple forms of evidence (32). In this research, interview accounts were compared with official texts and, where analytically relevant, cultural materials. Contradictions among sources were not treated as methodological failures. Within a poststructuralist framework, such contradictions could themselves reveal competing discourses or unstable articulations. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, confidentiality, protection of participants' identities, and sensitivity to the political implications of discussing gender, law, religion, and public policy. General ethical principles concerning respect, informed participation, confidentiality, and the protection of research participants were followed (33). Reflexivity was also essential because interpretation in discourse analysis is not independent of the researcher's conceptual standpoint. The analytical objective was therefore not to claim a neutral view from outside discourse but to make the interpretive logic explicit and consistently grounded in the empirical corpus.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed two broad and competing discursive formations through which women's identity in post-revolutionary Iran is constructed. The first is an official governmental-religious discourse whose central nodal point can be described as the "elevated family." The second is an unofficial modern-critical discourse organized primarily around the "right to choose and individual agency." These formations do not simply disagree over particular policies. They construct different conceptions of the female subject and organize many of the same concepts into divergent chains of meaning. The official discourse remains strongly supported by institutional resources, while the unofficial discourse operates more extensively through lived experience, professional autonomy, critical intellectual and civil spaces, everyday negotiation, and digital communication. Their relationship is therefore best understood as a hegemonic struggle in which institutional power and cultural identification do not necessarily coincide. This finding accords with Laclau and Mouffe's argument that hegemony is never a complete or final closure of the social field (9). The apparent stability of a dominant discourse can coexist with significant dislocation at the level of identification, everyday practice, and contested meaning.

Within the official discourse, the family was not merely one valued institution among several; it operated as the principal interpretive center through which women's other activities acquired legitimacy. Participants associated with official institutions repeatedly defined a successful woman through her capacity to integrate family responsibilities, religious commitment, and socially beneficial activity. Motherhood and wifehood were not represented solely as private roles but as socially consequential responsibilities connected to the moral reproduction of society. This orientation reflects a wider post-revolutionary pattern in which women's public participation has often been supported while remaining linked to broader assumptions about family responsibility. Sadeghi Fasaei and colleagues identified changes in official representations across executive periods, yet family and gendered responsibility remained important elements of policy discourse (5). Mirabi and colleagues similarly show that the

role of women in development policy has been articulated through changing political priorities rather than through a simple transition from exclusion to equality (6). The present findings extend this literature by showing that family does not merely appear as a policy topic; it operates as a nodal point that organizes the meaning of female subjectivity.

The official construction of employment illustrates this relational logic. Employment was generally not rejected. Several participants regarded employed, educated, socially active women positively, and public participation was often described as compatible with ideal womanhood. Yet employment was frequently legitimized when it remained balanced with motherhood, marital responsibility, family stability, or socially valued service. Its meaning was therefore conditional. Historical analysis of women's employment in Iran has demonstrated how female economic activity has repeatedly been positioned within broader ideological and developmental discourses (2). The present analysis shows the micro-discursive form of this process: employment becomes a legitimate "moment" within official discourse when articulated with the family rather than with the unlimited autonomy of the individual. Education follows a similar logic. Knowledge and professional specialization are valued, but they are often framed as capacities that improve family management, childrearing, service to society, or appropriate forms of professional contribution.

The same structure organizes hijab and chastity. Within the official discourse, hijab was primarily constructed as religious obligation, moral protection, social security, and a boundary distinguishing legitimate female public presence from cultural patterns associated with sexual commodification. This articulation gives hijab a much broader function than clothing. It becomes a signifier through which the woman is positioned as morally autonomous from a supposedly objectifying consumer culture while simultaneously remaining integrated into a religious normative order. Mir-Hosseini's earlier analysis of veiling and emerging feminist debates showed how deeply questions of dress were intertwined with post-revolutionary political and religious transformations (8). The present findings indicate that hijab continues to function as an important boundary marker because it condenses a wider struggle concerning who possesses authority to define respectable public womanhood.

The official construction of freedom provides an even clearer example of discursive rearticulation. Participants did not usually reject freedom as a value. Instead, freedom was often defined as internal liberation, moral self-mastery, the capacity to make correct decisions, freedom from enslavement to desire, and resistance to cultural domination. Such a definition displaces the center of freedom from external institutional constraint toward the ethical self. This is important because it demonstrates that hegemonic competition frequently occurs through redefinition rather than outright rejection. Laclau's concept of floating signifiers captures precisely this type of struggle, in which a socially valued word remains available to competing articulations (18). The official discourse can therefore present itself as a defender of freedom while rejecting an alternative definition centered on unrestricted personal choice.

Dignity is organized in a comparable manner. Official participants frequently connected women's dignity to chastity, moral recognition, protection from sexual objectification, and the refusal to reduce women to bodies or commodities. This representation resonates with wider critiques of Western modernity that position Islamic gender norms as protective rather than oppressive. Yet the interviews also revealed limited internal variation. Some institutionally situated participants connected dignity to women's full human value and questioned discriminatory practices from within a religious framework. Such statements demonstrate that official discourse is not completely closed. Islamic feminist scholarship has similarly shown that women can employ religious reasoning to criticize existing inequalities (7). Mahmood's work also cautions against assuming that religious subject formation is

necessarily reducible to passive conformity (12). These internal differences matter because they indicate potential sites of rearticulation through which hegemonic discourse can adapt to emerging demands.

The official discourse establishes coherence partly through antagonistic differentiation. “Western feminism,” “cultural invasion,” secular individualism, and sexual permissiveness emerged as recurring representations of the constitutive outside. Feminism was often presented not as a heterogeneous body of thought but as a project that undermines family, produces conflict between women and men, and facilitates the commodification of women. This representation functions hegemonically because it condenses diverse alternative claims into a recognizable threat. Moghissi has examined the difficult relationship among feminism, religious politics, and culturalist interpretations of gender in Muslim contexts (16). From the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe, however, the empirical significance of “Western feminism” lies not primarily in whether this representation accurately describes feminist theory, but in the role it plays in stabilizing an official identity. By defining what legitimate Iranian or Muslim womanhood is not, the discourse reinforces the boundaries of what it is.

The unofficial discourse reverses the organizing principle. Its nodal point is not the family but the “right to choose and individual agency.” Participants associated with this discourse frequently rejected the assumption that a woman’s primary identity should be prescribed through motherhood, wifehood, national symbolism, or institutional definitions of religious femininity. Instead, women were described first as full human subjects entitled to determine their life trajectories. The right to choose included decisions regarding education, occupation, marriage, lifestyle, political participation, bodily presentation, and the manner in which religion or tradition would be incorporated into personal identity. This does not mean that family was universally rejected. Rather, family was displaced from its position as the unquestioned source of female identity. It became an institution that could be supportive or restrictive and therefore open to evaluation from the standpoint of the woman as an agent.

This emphasis on agency corresponds with changes documented in the broader literature. Women’s strategies for entering political arenas demonstrate that female political action frequently involves active negotiation of institutions rather than passive adaptation (4). Women’s rights claims in electoral contexts similarly indicate the emergence of women as rights-bearing political claimants capable of comparing institutional promises with legal and constitutional arrangements (3). More broadly, Bayat’s analysis of ordinary politics helps explain how social change may be advanced through dispersed daily practices that gradually normalize alternative expectations (10). The present study suggests that “right to choose” can operate as a nodal point through which such dispersed practices acquire a common discursive direction, even in the absence of a unified organization.

Economic independence is one of the strongest moments within the unofficial articulation. Employment was described not merely as participation in development or contribution to household income but as a practical condition of agency. Financial resources allow women to negotiate family decisions, resist unwanted dependence, leave harmful relationships, make occupational choices, and exercise the capacity to refuse. The meaning of economic independence is therefore emancipatory rather than primarily functional. Yet this finding also reveals one of the most interesting cases of apparent overlap between the discourses. Official and unofficial participants may both value women’s financial capacity, but they place it within different equivalential chains. Official discourse connects it to family resilience and responsible social contribution, whereas unofficial discourse connects it to autonomy and bargaining power. This demonstrates why shared vocabulary cannot automatically be interpreted as shared meaning.

The unofficial articulation of clothing provides another decisive contrast. Covering is defined as an aspect of bodily self-determination and personal expression. Compulsory hijab is therefore interpreted not simply as a religious requirement with which one disagrees but as an institutional claim over the female body. Clothing becomes a “field of power” because the conflict concerns who is entitled to determine the legitimate public presentation of the female subject. This rearticulation transforms hijab from a moral signifier into a political one. Mir-Hosseini’s earlier work identified veiling as a central arena in the emergence of feminist voices in post-Khomeini Iran (8). The present findings show that this symbolic intensity persists because clothing now condenses broader questions of citizenship, personal choice, bodily authority, and the limits of state regulation.

Freedom in the unofficial discourse is likewise relocated from moral interiority to social and political conditions. Participants described freedom through the absence of fear, censorship, coercion, punishment, and compulsory self-monitoring. Freedom meant being able to live according to chosen values, express criticism, participate in public life, and present oneself without constant anticipation of institutional or social sanction. This articulation places freedom in a chain with citizenship, legal accountability, bodily autonomy, and voice. The semantic distance between the two definitions of freedom is therefore considerable. One discourse treats freedom primarily as correct self-government within a religious ethical order; the other treats freedom primarily as protection from externally imposed constraints. Mouffe’s emphasis on the ineradicability of political conflict is relevant because the disagreement here cannot be solved merely by discovering a neutral definition acceptable to both parties (22). The meaning of freedom is itself the object of political struggle.

The same applies to dignity. In the unofficial discourse, dignity was primarily connected to recognition of women as full legal and rational persons, the capacity to make decisions, equality before law, and freedom from structural discrimination or violence. Rather than protection from sexual objectification through externally defined modesty, dignity is constructed through self-determination. This difference is theoretically significant because each discourse can understand the other as actively violating women’s dignity. The official discourse may regard compulsory moral boundaries as protection from objectification, while the unofficial discourse may regard those same boundaries as denial of personhood. Consequently, the two sides are not simply debating the amount of dignity women should receive. They are struggling to define its conditions of possibility.

Gender justice reveals an equally profound semantic antagonism. Within the official discourse, justice was often distinguished from mathematical equality. Differentiated rights and responsibilities could be defended as just when they were understood as corresponding to natural, social, or religious differences between women and men. The unofficial discourse rejected this distinction and interpreted legal differentiation as discrimination. Justice was therefore articulated with equal legal personhood rather than proportional differentiation. The literature on women and social change in the Middle East has long emphasized the centrality of legal and institutional structures in shaping gender relations (15). The present study shows that legal disagreement is embedded in a deeper ontological disagreement concerning whether gender differences justify differentiated rights or whether they should be excluded from the allocation of citizenship rights.

The unofficial discourse constructs its own antagonistic outside. Whereas official discourse frequently externalizes threat through “Western feminism” or cultural invasion, unofficial participants tend to identify the principal obstacle internally through discriminatory law, institutional patriarchy, restrictive readings of religion, official media representation, and state intervention in personal choices. This difference in causal attribution produces different strategies of change. Official participants often locate problems in cultural influence, insufficient religious

self-understanding, improper implementation, or the need for reform within legitimate interpretive frameworks. Unofficial participants more frequently locate problems within institutional structures themselves and therefore call for legal reform, civil action, economic empowerment, and broader transformation. The direction of critique is thus reversed: one protects the institutional core from external or cultural threats, while the other identifies that institutional core as the source of inequality.

Nevertheless, the unofficial discourse is not free from othering. Some critical participants represented women who endorse official norms as reproducing patriarchy or as insufficiently aware of structural inequality. This finding is analytically important because it demonstrates the symmetrical logic of antagonistic identity formation. Both discourses can simplify internal diversity by constructing an “Other” against whom their preferred subject becomes coherent. Laclau and Mouffe’s framework makes it possible to analyze these exclusions without assuming that one side alone is discursive while the other simply represents reality (9). The task is to understand how each project establishes boundaries and which identities are rendered legitimate, mistaken, alienated, or threatening.

One of the most significant findings is the phenomenon of dual life. Several participants associated with the unofficial discourse described a gap between their public conduct and private identification. They complied with expectations in workplaces, universities, streets, or other regulated environments while privately maintaining different attitudes toward clothing, gender roles, relationships, and personal freedom. This should not be interpreted merely as inconsistency. De Certeau’s concept of tactical practice offers a useful way to understand how subjects operate within structures they do not control by adapting outward behavior while preserving alternative meanings (11). Such practices constitute a form of quiet negotiation. The participant who complies with a public rule because of anticipated consequences but does not incorporate the rule into her self-understanding is institutionally compliant without being discursively incorporated.

This distinction has major implications for hegemony. Gramscian hegemony depends on more than formal obedience; it requires some degree of cultural leadership and consent (23). When visible conformity is increasingly separated from internal identification, institutional dominance may coexist with cultural fragility. The interviews suggest that this gap is particularly evident in relation to clothing, media representations, lifestyle, and the meaning of freedom. The official discourse continues to possess the capacity to regulate public conduct, but regulation should not automatically be interpreted as successful subject formation. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, dual life can therefore be read as evidence of dislocation: the existing discourse remains institutionally powerful yet cannot fully absorb the experiences and identities generated within changing social conditions (17).

Digital spaces intensify this instability. Officially oriented participants often described social media as a source of cultural danger, misinformation, or destabilizing influence, although some also treated it pragmatically as an instrument for communicating religious ideas. Unofficial participants more frequently described digital space as an arena in which they could express aspects of themselves constrained in official settings. Social media thus operates as an alternative field of articulation where previously marginalized experiences can become visible and where dispersed grievances can be connected. Bayat’s analysis of ordinary politics is useful because such spaces allow everyday practices to accumulate without requiring centralized organization (10). The significance of digital communication is therefore not only that it transmits feminist content; it changes the conditions under which subjects encounter alternative vocabularies and recognize that experiences previously treated as private may be shared.

The findings consequently point toward a distinction between institutional hegemony and cultural hegemony. The official discourse remains embedded in legal and political structures and retains considerable capacity to define

formal norms. Yet its ability to monopolize the meaning of womanhood appears weaker in areas where lived experience, economic change, education, professionalization, and digital communication have expanded women's exposure to competing articulations. The unofficial discourse lacks comparable institutional authority, but it has succeeded in rearticulating major floating signifiers. Dignity is moved from chastity toward legal personhood; freedom from moral self-discipline toward freedom from coercion; employment from family service toward independence; clothing from obligation toward choice; and justice from differentiated proportionality toward equality. Laclau's theory of emancipation emphasizes precisely the political importance of such rearticulation (18).

At the same time, the findings do not support a simple prediction that one discourse will inevitably eliminate the other. There are boundary cases in which religious commitment coexists with demands for greater choice, women within official institutions criticize discriminatory arrangements, and individuals who value family reject its use as a complete definition of womanhood. These cases indicate the potential emergence of hybrid subject positions. They also demonstrate that religious language itself may remain contested. Islamic feminist research shows that equality-oriented claims can be generated through religious reinterpretation (7). Mahmood's analysis demonstrates that religious agency cannot be reduced to liberal autonomy (12). Therefore, the future of women's discourse in Iran may involve not only the expansion or decline of existing camps but also the reconstruction of their nodal points through partial accommodation and new articulations.

The study ultimately reveals a "crisis of meaning" rather than merely a disagreement over policy. Freedom, dignity, justice, family, clothing, and independence no longer operate as universally shared concepts with marginal disagreements about application. They have become central sites of hegemonic struggle. Each discourse attempts to transform contingent meanings into common sense and to present its construction of the legitimate woman as natural, moral, rational, or inevitable. Yet the persistence of competing interpretations prevents final closure. In this sense, women's identity in post-revolutionary Iran provides a clear empirical example of Laclau and Mouffe's central theoretical claim: society is never completely sutured, and political struggle continually reopens meanings that hegemonic formations attempt to stabilize (9). The Iranian woman emerges not as the expression of a single cultural essence but as a subject formed within this ongoing contest over the boundaries of family, religion, citizenship, agency, and legitimate social existence.

Conclusion

This study examined the construction of women's identity in post-revolutionary Iran through the interaction and antagonism of official and unofficial discourses. The analysis demonstrates that women's identity cannot be adequately represented as a unified social category derived automatically from religion, culture, state policy, feminism, modernization, or individual experience. Instead, womanhood is produced within a contested field of meanings in which different actors attempt to establish authoritative definitions of legitimate female identity. These definitions organize rights, responsibilities, bodies, family relations, economic activity, morality, citizenship, and participation into broader and competing visions of social order. The central conflict is consequently not confined to the question of whether women should participate in public life or whether particular laws should change. It concerns the more fundamental issue of who possesses the authority to define the meaning of being a woman and the principles through which female agency becomes legitimate.

The official discourse identified in this study is organized primarily around the nodal point of the elevated family. Within this structure, women are positioned as morally responsible actors whose social value is strongly connected

to family cohesion, motherhood, marital responsibility, religious commitment, and participation in the reproduction of an Islamic social order. This construction does not completely exclude women from public life. Education, employment, political engagement, and professional activity can all be incorporated into the official model, but their legitimacy is commonly interpreted through their compatibility with family responsibilities and religiously authorized norms. The resulting subject is therefore neither simply domestic nor fully individualized. She is a socially active woman whose public agency remains normatively linked to family, morality, and collective responsibility.

The unofficial discourse reorganizes the same social field around a different nodal point: the right to choose and individual agency. Within this articulation, women are understood primarily as full human subjects entitled to define their life trajectories and to participate in decisions concerning education, employment, marriage, family, clothing, public presence, political engagement, and personal identity. Family is not necessarily rejected, but it is removed from the position of an unquestionable source of women's identity. It becomes one social relationship among others, valuable when supportive but subject to criticism when it reproduces coercion or inequality. Employment likewise acquires a different meaning. Rather than primarily serving family resilience or collective development, financial independence becomes a practical condition for meaningful agency because it provides women with greater capacity to negotiate, refuse, leave, choose, and act.

The comparison of the two discourses reveals that the deepest antagonism does not arise because one discourse possesses values and the other rejects them. Both frequently invoke freedom, dignity, justice, family welfare, security, women's social participation, education, employment, and personal development. Their conflict arises because these terms occupy different positions within competing systems of meaning. Freedom can refer to moral self-mastery and living within a divinely grounded order, or it can refer to protection from external coercion and the capacity to choose. Dignity can refer to chastity, moral recognition, and protection from commodification, or it can refer to equal legal personhood and recognition of women's decision-making authority. Justice can mean proportional differentiation between gendered rights and responsibilities, or it can mean equal legal rights irrespective of gender. Clothing can signify obligation, protection, and collective morality, or bodily autonomy and personal identity. The same vocabulary therefore creates an illusion of semantic proximity while concealing fundamental disagreements.

The analysis of antagonistic boundaries further shows that each discourse requires an Other against which its preferred woman becomes intelligible. The official discourse constructs Western feminism, cultural invasion, sexual commodification, and certain forms of secular individualism as threats to family and morally legitimate womanhood. The unofficial discourse constructs discriminatory law, institutional patriarchy, compulsory gender norms, restrictive interpretations of religion, and political control over personal life as threats to women's full humanity and agency. These boundaries simplify complex social realities, but they also perform an important identity function. They allow participants in each discourse to recognize their own project as coherent by representing an alternative project as a danger that must be resisted.

One of the most important findings concerns the difference between institutional power and lived identification. Official discourse continues to possess extensive resources for the regulation and reproduction of gender norms. Laws, bureaucratic structures, formal educational environments, policy documents, and official media provide it with an institutional capacity unavailable to unofficial discourse. Yet the existence of such capacity should not be equated with complete hegemonic success. Interviews revealed situations in which individuals publicly conformed to expectations they did not privately accept. The gap between outward conduct and inward identification was

particularly visible in discussions of clothing, lifestyle, public self-presentation, and freedom. This phenomenon may be described as a dual life in which women strategically negotiate institutional requirements while maintaining alternative identities in private, professional, interpersonal, or digital contexts.

Dual life is theoretically significant because it reveals the limits of approaches that infer identity directly from observable behavior. A woman who complies with an institutional rule may do so because she accepts its moral legitimacy, because she considers compliance socially practical, because she fears consequences, because she wishes to avoid conflict, or because she separates public conduct from private identity. These motivations are discursively different even if the visible behavior is similar. The persistence of such discrepancies indicates that institutional conformity can coexist with hegemonic instability. Where a discourse regulates behavior without securing identification, its authority remains powerful but incomplete.

Digital and alternative communicative spaces intensify this incompleteness by creating arenas in which marginalized experiences can be narrated, compared, and reinterpreted. Experiences that may have appeared individual or private can become part of a shared vocabulary when women encounter similar accounts from others. Such processes are especially significant for the articulation of choice, bodily autonomy, economic independence, legal equality, and dissatisfaction with official representation. The importance of these spaces does not lie only in their capacity to disseminate particular political messages. They enable the formation of alternative interpretive communities in which women can test different descriptions of themselves, compare experiences, and recognize previously individualized tensions as broader social patterns.

The findings nevertheless caution against reducing the post-revolutionary field to two homogeneous and permanently opposed populations. Official and unofficial discourses are analytical formations rather than fixed social camps. Some women located within official institutions articulate critical positions on law and equality. Some women associated with unofficial discourse retain religious commitments and strong family orientations. Some combine personal autonomy with moral or spiritual forms of self-discipline. Others shift between discursive positions according to social context. These boundary and hybrid positions suggest that the struggle over women's identity is also occurring within the discourses themselves. Their future depends partly on whether they can absorb new demands without losing the nodal principles that give them coherence.

The existence of such hybrid positions is particularly important for understanding the possibility of discursive transformation. A hegemonic formation does not necessarily change only when it is defeated by an external opponent. It may change through internal rearticulation, reinterpretation of existing values, or the gradual incorporation of demands previously represented as incompatible. Similarly, an unofficial discourse may become more internally differentiated as it expands and encounters women whose demands for autonomy do not imply rejection of religion, family, or collective identity. The future field may therefore include new articulations that cannot be adequately described through a strict opposition between religious family-centered womanhood and secular autonomous womanhood.

The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing apparent agreement from substantive agreement. Economic independence is a particularly clear example. Both official and unofficial positions may affirm women's capacity to earn income, yet they can value it for fundamentally different reasons. If financial independence is interpreted primarily as strengthening the family and ensuring household resilience, it becomes incorporated into a family-centered chain of meaning. If it is interpreted as the material basis of autonomy, bargaining power, and the capacity to reject unwanted dependence, it becomes part of an agency-centered chain. Future analysis of gender

discourse should therefore move beyond the frequency of particular words and examine the relational structure that gives those words political meaning.

The research further indicates that women's identity in contemporary Iran is formed through continuous interaction among structure, discourse, and everyday practice. Institutional arrangements delimit possibilities and impose consequences, but subjects interpret and negotiate these arrangements. Discourses offer recognizable positions, but individuals can partially identify with them rather than accept them as complete packages. Everyday actions can reproduce dominant meanings, but they can also gradually normalize alternatives. The result is a dynamic field in which power operates through law and institutions as well as language, moral judgment, representation, economic dependence, family expectation, and self-regulation.

The principal theoretical contribution of the study is therefore to show that the struggle over women's identity is fundamentally a struggle over the temporary stabilization of meaning. Official and unofficial discourses compete not only to influence policies but to define the categories through which policies and experiences are understood. They seek to determine what freedom is, what dignity requires, what justice means, what family should represent, what constitutes legitimate religious commitment, and what forms of women's social participation count as empowerment. These meanings cannot be permanently settled because new experiences, generational changes, economic developments, educational expansion, legal controversies, and communicative technologies continually create opportunities for rearticulation.

The study has several limitations. Its qualitative and interpretive design does not permit statistical generalization to all Iranian women, nor was such generalization its objective. The participants were selected purposively because of their relevance to competing discursive positions, and the resulting analysis necessarily reflects the social and institutional locations represented in the corpus. Politically sensitive issues may also influence what participants are willing to express openly. In addition, unofficial discourse is highly dispersed and changes rapidly, especially in digital environments, making it impossible for a bounded study to represent its entire range. The analysis focuses primarily on verbal and textual material and therefore cannot fully capture visual, performative, and algorithmically mediated forms of gender discourse.

Future research should examine how the discursive structures identified here vary across generations, regions, social classes, ethnic communities, rural and urban settings, and different forms of religious identification. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable for determining whether concepts such as right to choose, family, dignity, and economic independence continue to be articulated in the same ways or acquire new meanings. Greater attention should also be devoted to visual and digital discourse, where identity is increasingly produced through images, videos, hashtags, styles of self-presentation, and networked interaction rather than through conventional text alone. Research on hybrid subjectivities may be particularly productive because it can move beyond the binary opposition between official and unofficial discourse and investigate how women selectively combine religious, national, familial, professional, feminist, and individualist elements in constructing their identities.

Ultimately, post-revolutionary Iranian womanhood should be understood not as a completed identity but as an unsettled political field. The official discourse continues to possess substantial institutional resources, yet the unofficial discourse has developed considerable capacity to challenge its meanings in everyday life and alternative communicative spaces. Neither has achieved complete closure. The future of women's identity in Iran will therefore depend not only on formal legal and political changes but also on the continuing struggle to define the concepts through which women understand themselves and are recognized by others. At the center of this struggle is a

fundamental question that remains unresolved: whether the legitimate female subject is primarily defined through a morally ordered collective framework or through the individual capacity to choose, negotiate, and author one's own life. The persistence of that unresolved question ensures that women's identity will remain one of the central arenas in which power, culture, religion, law, and social change are negotiated in contemporary Iran.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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